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April 4, 2009

**You can get it if you really want**  
Seattle, Washington\*

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First, I must thank your President and Dr. Pellegrini for the very kind invitation to join you and speak at dinner. I am honored that a group of academic surgeons could think that an internist/nephrologist turned public health bureaucrat could have something useful to say. I must also thank my friend Dr. Haile Debas, a past President of your Society whom I have known and respected as one of this country's most distinguished academic surgeons. Perhaps he suggested me as a speaker tonight because he thought that we had something in common, in the sense that we are both from developing countries, have been chairs of academic departments and have become involved in global health issues.

Of course, on receiving the invitation I looked up the history of your Society and noted specially the report about the dinner after your 1991 meeting which was addressed by Derek Bok, President of Harvard University. The comment was that the event was an unqualified success. I wonder why that kind of comment has never been made subsequently. I will be reading the report of this meeting with great interest because if the tradition of silence is maintained, it will denote that my speech like the others was not an unqualified success, but perhaps I will hope that no comment could also mean that at least it was not an unmitigated disaster.

I began to think about what I would say this evening on the way back from a meeting in Kampala, Uganda a few weeks ago where I was addressing a group of Ministers as well as academics and administrators on the need to scale up the level of attention to the chronic non-communicable diseases, which are currently one of my major interests. This is a topic about which I am passionate and I think I conveyed some of that passion to them. I ended my presentation with the lines from Jimmy Cliff's "The Harder They Come" which says:

*You can get it if you really want  
You can get it if you really want  
You can get it if you really want  
But you must try, try, try  
Try and try you'll succeed at last.*

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\* Presented at the 2009 Presidential Dinner, Society of Black Academic Surgeons, Seattle, Washington, 4 April 2009

I did not think that many people there knew Jimmy Cliff, and was pleasantly surprised when Princess Zahra, the daughter of the Aga Khan whose Foundation sponsored the conference not only knew the words, but could sing them.

I thought I would direct myself predominantly to the younger academics tonight and I wondered about the truth of Jimmy Cliff's philosophy. What was the "it" that we want, especially we academic physicians? What is "it"? And this is no take on presidential grammatical gymnastics. What is "it" that I should want and what could "it" be especially for the young academic surgeons here who are at the stage of development I was at about thirty-five years ago? I thought I would explore this and at the same time follow one of Dr. Pellegrini's instructions and speak a bit about myself, how I have got here, how I chose the path I have followed and ponder whether my work has had any impact, especially on minorities.

I was born in Barbados in 1932 as the first of seven children, at a time when that island was one of if not the unhealthiest of the Caribbean countries. The infant mortality rate was so high that I had about a one in three chance of surviving to my first birthday. But survive I did to age one and beyond, perhaps thanks to or in spite of the bush teas that my grandmother made us drink, plus the castor oil and other purges which were necessary to cleanse the system-or so she claimed.

My father was an elementary school teacher who believed that knowledge is best imparted from above through the spoken word and from below with the rod, and I tell my grandchildren that my character flaws are the result of my having been abused as a child-badly abused, but very loved! In due course I went to high school, studied Latin and Greek and was fortunate enough to win a scholarship to study medicine at the University College of the West Indies which had started just three years previously. As a youth I was fiercely nationalistic and believed that I had to be a part of the first major academic experiment in the Caribbean. I have no doubt that my Latin and Greek helped me through medicine.

In due course I graduated in Medicine and did reasonably well, although if I had not spent so much time playing poker and bridge, I might have done better. However, I have always contended that those two games helped to build my character and gave me my first lessons in behavioral psychology. You can tell a man's character by the way he plays poker. I do not know why they have not become standard parts of the medical curriculum.

After graduation I made the most important career decision and 50 years ago succumbed to what is known as professional incest. I married a nurse-a Jamaican nurse. She is not always amused when I tell her of the three stages of man. When men are young they need lovers, in middle age they need friends and when they become old they need nurses, so it is good fortune to have all three in one. I went back home to Barbados to work for a time and then went off to Britain to do my postgraduate training in internal medicine. I eventually returned to Jamaica to the University and spent about eight years

working in a metabolic laboratory under John Waterlow-one of the finest investigators I have ever known. Those were days of self experimentation and development of self reliance. I learnt that Sprague Dawley rats are really man's best friend and could tell many tales of my little friends.

During that period I also worked in Boston where I first heard of the legendary Francis D. Moore of the Peter Bent Brigham, whose name was always spoken with hushed awe even among the medical fellows and he is alleged to have said that a good surgeon is only an internist who has the manual dexterity to operate. I understood more clearly the role of the surgical investigator and my heart warmed to a quote attributed to him recently by one of his students. He said about surgeon-investigators;

*"The surgical investigator must be a bridge tender, channeling knowledge from biological science to the patient's bedside and back again. He traces his origins from both ends of the bridge, he is thus a bastard, and everyone calls him this. Those at one end of the bridge say that he is not a very good scientist, and those at the other end say he does not spend enough time in the operating room."*

I can't imagine anyone calling Francis D. Moore a bastard!

I eventually became Professor of Medicine and Chair of the Department of Medicine in the University of the West Indies and do not think me immodest when I say that my research group that worked on renal biochemistry was one of the best in the world. I would take delight at the American scientific meetings in saying that our work originated in Jamaica-not Jamaica, Long Island, but Jamaica, 90 miles south of Cuba.

Just when my department was better funded, better housed and better staffed than it had ever been and our post graduate training program had been firmly established, I became more and more involved in international medicine and eventually decided to leave academia and join the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). I think it was because I felt that I could influence more people than if I remained in personal care medicine. Of course I have learnt that there must be no idea of personal care medicine having greater or less value than population medicine. They are just different and there is immense satisfaction to be derived from both.

Eventually I became Director of PAHO with a staff of about 2,500 distributed all over the Americas and an annual budget of about 250 million dollars. I retired about six years ago as Director Emeritus and am almost as busy now or busier than before. One of the aspects of my post retirement work that gives me immense pleasure is my interaction with students at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. My endorphin levels rise when I give seminars or teach one of my courses.

All of this is a long winded approach to trying to identify what is the "it" I have got by trying over the past 50 years and what is the "it" that I hope will be the holy grail of the young and aspiring academics here. I believe that it is the ability or facility to

acquire knowledge and to transmit information especially to the young. I submit that nothing gives a teacher greater satisfaction than explaining a concept to a student or colleague at any level and seeing from his or her eyes that it is grasped and internalized. There is immense joy to be obtained from articulating with passion a position that embraces a set of values, having it accepted, internalized and acted upon.

I am a firm believer in the cascade of knowledge which you will find in TS Elliott's Chorus of the Rock where he speaks of

*The endless cycle of idea and action,  
Endless invention, endless experiment,*

And asks,

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*

And of course information is constructed from data.

We gather data, we transform it into information, we internalize and manipulate that information which becomes our personal knowledge, and it is only on the basis of that knowledge that we have the wisdom to adopt a course of action. Our knowledge is the basis of our decision making and there is no profession more acutely aware of this than yours. Knowledge is very individual and that is one reason why I have little time for the new-fangled discipline of Knowledge Management. The only thing we manage is information.

It is a sacred task to have the responsibility to transmit information. You will recall that Socrates drank the hemlock because it was believed that he was corrupting the young through transmitting heretical information to them. But the responsibility you and persons like us who are minorities have is not only the transmission of information. There is a responsibility to proselytize actively and aggressively and seek disciples to whom we can transmit this information so that they can have knowledge and themselves be members of a chain of knowledge workers which stretches back through the ages to the very beginning of academia.

I have also learned as I have tried to get and transmit information in the academic setting that there is another very critical role to be played and that is the value affirmation role of the academic institution through its staff. It is not that there are not values outside of academia, but those of academia are genuinely sacred-the search for what at the time we consider the truth and to transmit it with the self-confidence and humility of knowing that the orthodoxy of today possibly was the heterodoxy of yesterday and may well be the obscurantism of tomorrow.

I am often asked if the assumption is correct that one has to be extraordinarily talented to succeed and if success is tied into the development of long term plans. This

has often caused me to wonder whether there is indeed the “talented tenth”. You will recall WE Du Bois famous statement:

*“The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races”.*

I have been intrigued by a book I read recently entitled “Talent is overrated” by Geoff Colvin who proposes that great achievement is not reserved for a talented few. So perhaps Jimmy Cliff is really correct and we can all, or at least most of us get it if we really want; we just have to try. And that is exactly what Colvin proposes. It is what he calls “deliberate practice” that makes the difference. By deliberate practice he refers to activity designed specifically to inculcate the relevant skill and the results are even better with the guidance of a mentor. Unfortunately acquiring mastery involves a great deal of repetition as you surgeons well know. Malcolm Caldwell in his book “The Outliers” makes a similar argument and says that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to be really good at anything. But that mentoring, that insistence on deliberate practice is critical if you are to beget the others who follow you and stand on your shoulders.

Have my efforts made a difference or had an impact especially on minorities? It borders on hubris for me to respond positively to say so. But when I see some of my former students who look like me and are now placed in positions in which they can influence others, I say, perhaps.

In my simulated retirement I have been involved in many activities besides being Chancellor of my University. I mentioned my passion for the chronic non-communicable diseases and the drive to have them recognized as being no longer the problem of the affluent. 1998 was the last year in which infectious diseases claimed more lives in the world than the non-communicable diseases. You surgeons see some of the sequelae-the coronary bypasses, the renal transplants and the amputations because of diabetes. I am particularly sensitive to the last one. In my own small country of Barbados, over a six year period there were about 1000 amputations for diabetes. The tsunami of non-communicable diseases can and must be controlled.

I also derive considerable satisfaction from being the Secretary General of the United Nations’ Special Envoy for HIV /AIDS in the Caribbean. I have the advantage of being able to speak freely about controversial issues such as the rampant homophobia of the Caribbean society which inhibits an adequate public health response to the epidemic, the need for wider use of condoms and the urgent need to focus more keenly on the prevention of HIV infection especially in young girls.

Let me wish you well and hope that you accept the thesis that you can get it if you really want and all you have to do is try. I must not of course omit to add that there must

be opportunity but my gray hairs have convinced me that opportunity knocks most loudly on the doors of the prepared. I hope you reflect on what that “it” is for each and every one of you. But whatever it is, I hope that in the trying you touch the lives of the young among you and convince them that this profession in all its aspects is genuinely a magnificent obsession.

Thanks for your attention and I wish your Association well.